
Changing roles for changing times: experience from the LJMU off-campus team



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INTRODUCTION

This article started life as a presentation at the 2008 North West Academic Libraries (NoWAL) Conference *Up Close and Personal: our changing roles in a digital learning age* in September 2008, entitled 'Who am I and what am I doing here?: the impact of the pervasive digital environment within an academic library'. The core theme of this conference explored the changing roles of information professionals as a result of living and working in the digital age.

We work in the off-campus team in Learning and Information Services (LIS) at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) providing the technical infrastructure, enquiry support, inductions, outreach and forward planning of the off-campus service to all LJMU students and staff. The two team members had two separate roles as Information Officer and Computing Officer when the service was first established, but these have merged, with more sharing of duties (and expertise) as the service has developed. In this article we aim to explain how and why we feel that we are in a strong position to embrace the challenges and new ways of working that accompany the development of the digital learning environment.

We briefly consider how our experiences could be useful to others and (from our experience) what skills are required by today's professionals.

WHERE DID THE OFF-CAMPUS TEAM COME FROM?

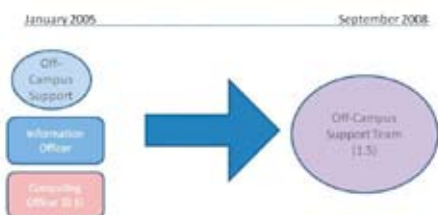
The LJMU Strategic Plan for 2003-2008 outlined the foreseeable changes to the portfolio of programmes within the next five years. It predicted that there would be a greater emphasis on post-graduate, professional and CPD programmes in the UK market and an increase of 50% in the total number of international (non-EU) students by 2008. The University's commitment to widening participation meant there would also be a greater emphasis on the delivery of foundation degree at partner institutions. Currently we have 78 partner institutions delivering a total of 263 awards. There are around 4300 students studying a wide range of courses in these institutions.

One of Learning and Information Service responses to support this growth area was to set up the Off-Campus Support Team in order to develop and enhance both the computing and library support available to off-campus users. An additional remit included the development of services to support the specific needs of the "non-traditional" user groups, for example students in partner institutions. Thus, the Off-Campus Support Team would become the first point of contact for all off-campus and partnership queries and would raise the profile of off-campus and partnership college issues within LIS and in other departments.

The team consists of 1.5 FTE staff managed by the Principal Information Officer for Off-Campus and Partnerships and has been at full strength since January 2005.

WHO WAS I AND WHERE DID I COME FROM?

Who am I now and how did I get here?



As individuals we came from very different backgrounds. Cath has a professional library background with a Master in Information and Library Management completed in 1996, followed by a variety of jobs with Library and Information Services at LJMU, ending up in the off-campus role in September 2004. Rosie has an IT background, joining LJMU in 1993 as a Computing Officer with expertise in both computer software support and e-learning and becoming a member of the off-campus support team in January 2005.

WHO AM I NOW AND HOW DID I GET HERE?



As our team has grown and developed, we have retained our individual areas of expertise but developed new shared skills as well. We have increased our individual and collective skills through the work we do, the willingness to embrace new technologies and working practices.

The NoWAL conference had four main themes, all relevant to the development of our roles: building relationships; engagement with users; skills development of users; and new staff roles and skills

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Liaison

Liaison is a big part of what we do. We liaise with other staff in LIS, with other University departments and with partners beyond Liverpool. We work with LIS subject information officers and computing officers to make sure that everyone considers off-campus issues in service provision, whether considering Library system developments, preparing user education sessions or writing user guides. We work with our colleagues in Computing and Information Services (CIS) to develop the IT support to our users and ensure that all members of LJMU can access our services easily while off-campus, alerting CIS staff to problems encountered, helping to test solutions and working collaboratively to provide web-based documentation.

Outside LJMU we work with a range of staff in partner colleges including administrative, library and academic staff. We visit our partner colleges offering a wide range of face to face services including introductory sessions, in depth resource searching and staff development in the use of the LJMU Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

In the Off-Campus Support Team we make great efforts to ensure that liaison is proactive and active. We have developed and continue to maintain key contacts within other departments and outside the university. We make sure we have a presence on all committees and groups which impact on off-campus users.

For the future, we need to work collaboratively to build a strong library services team to provide an efficient service. We always need to consider off-campus users when improvements or enhancements are made to our systems. Staff in liaison teams are beginning to leave their offices behind, to 'get out there' where our customers are and talk to the wider LJMU community to share/promote our expertise and resources. We can do this in a number of ways – for example, Faculty days in the Learning Resource Centres or Faculty Roadshows, visiting staff at their staff rooms or office desks. We all need to continue to build on the strong relationships with partner colleges – both library and teaching staff. Visits to the partner institutions are still very valuable in the digital age and the combination of expertise offered by a subject officer and a member of the off-campus team is very much appreciated. We work at maintaining strong relationships with other departments within the university such as the computing service so that we can influence university wide strategic developments.

ENGAGEMENT WITH USERS

Off-Campus Enquiry & Advice service

The off-campus team runs a virtual enquiry and advice service with a potential customer base of all 28,500 LJMU members. We have a dedicated phone number, email address, msn account, and web-based form all of which are advertised on our website. Our website is listed on the main LJMU student and staff home page. We deal with enquiries on a wide variety of subject matter, both computing and information and we have each had to increase our skills and knowledge base to be able to manage this effectively. We manage our enquiries using a database to keep track of incoming enquiries, but also use as a searchable

knowledge base and to collect usage statistics. The volume and range of queries is much greater than either of us has ever dealt with before in our previous roles and enquiries continue to grow year on year. We engage with the whole of user population and since the team came into being enquiries have increased by 200%.

LIS is now developing a one-stop service for all remote enquiries based on the experiences of the off-campus support team. The importance of the quality of this first point of contact for users has been recognised and service standards are also being developed to ensure consistency and quality.

SPECIALIST ADVICE AND KNOWLEDGE

We offer specialist advice in a number of areas including access to E-resources. We refer to information officers for specialist in-depth knowledge of databases and search strategies within subject areas. Our expertise lies in access to these resources from outside the university network. Our specialist advice extends to E-Learning support; we talk with academics about off-campus issues encountered by their students. We are part of joint discussion forums for Distance Learning courses, offering the expertise in technical support. We have embraced technology and integrated it into what we do, for example the use of MSN Messenger for enquiry services. We look forward to new technology developments and consider how we can integrate them.

With a dedicated broadband connection and hub we can test user queries in real time and adapt to the different operating systems and software versions used by students and staff. We support the off-campus applications service which allows our users to access their personal filestore, email etc. as though they are on campus. Using our knowledge base of queries we can share information with others both within our department and outside. We truly work in the virtual world.

We feel there is a need for a different approach to engagement with users in the digital age and a greater need to be more comfortable working in the virtual world. There are a number of areas we have begun work in and other areas we feel we should be getting involved in.

In LIS there is a small team looking at subject blogs as an alternative way of communicating with our users. There is a mobile technologies project under way, with a specific focus on how

students use mobile devices and how they can be exploited in libraries. Enhancements to the online catalogue (OPAC) have begun to make it look more like commercial sites used by students, such as Amazon. Social bookmarking in our VLE is another area under investigation. We need to increase the use of MSN Messenger among staff. We will be exploiting a new sound studio for podcasting or audio guides and, like many other information services, we are debating whether we should have a presence on Facebook

SKILLS DEVELOPMENT OF USERS

User Education

The off-campus team is involved in user education both inside and outside the university campus. We deliver on-campus inductions for off-campus students as well as going out to partner colleges to deliver user education sessions to them on their home territory. As part of this we develop printed and web-based materials to support these types of users. The resources we produce are important but we also feel that face to face interaction is as important. We know that our partner staff and students value having had direct contact with 'the friendly face at the end of the telephone'. We've discovered that students from partner colleges in particular are more likely to contact us after they've met us, because then they know who they will be talking to.

Our work with our partner colleges is once again proactive, we go to them. We invited ourselves to our partner colleges in the first instance and such was the value they gained from our initial visit, they subsequently continue to ask us to go back. We know and can see from our e-resources usage statistics that our visits have had an impact, particularly with access to Athens resources.

We have evidence to say we increasingly see a widening of the digital divide. Some of our users can be described as digital 'refugees', a term coined for those users, whether returners to learning, school children who stop formal IT education aged 14 or those who do not have PCs at home, who are at the opposite side of the digital divide to the 'digital natives' described in so much current professional literature. They form an increasing percentage of our student body and we have to recognise and address their needs.

What we must be very clear about though is that in the digital age we do not expect those who we term 'digital natives' are all comfortable, compe-

tent and knowledgeable in all aspects of library and IT resources. Even the 'digital natives' only know what they know; they have a comfort zone and tend not to be prepared to explore on their own.

As information professionals we need to be able to comprehend and help/support and operate at both sides of the digital divide and everything we do needs to take it into account. This means we need targeted and focused user education, whether that is face-to-face, documentation or online learning units. We need easy access to academic information resources, as easy to use as Google, whether in print or electronic format and accessible staff support.

NEW ROLES AND SKILLS FOR STAFF

Through working in the off-campus support team we have developed a wider range of skills. We have had to learn to be comfortable working both in the virtual and the real world, becoming if you like 'bi-lingual' equally at home in the virtual (off-campus) or real (on-campus) world. We have seized opportunities presented to us, embracing the challenges and possibilities offered by the emerging technologies and resultant changes to ways of interacting with our users. In essence, embracing emerging technologies has not only enabled us to keep pace with our users' support needs but has also given us the vision to strategically develop and 'future proof' our services.

So what does this mean for the wider profession? National and internationally there is a recognition within the profession that traditional skills and roles need to change. Relevant Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programmes need to be developed to address this.

Examples of CPD which might be considered include:

- Self-awareness training – we need to know the strengths and weaknesses and how to play to the former and minimise the latter within the team
- We need to build up the base level of skills, to build up core competencies
- We need to have sufficient IT skills so that everyone can understand the basics and can recognise what is potentially useful and can embrace and take on new technologies
- Project management and group leadership skills
- Marketing and promotional skills
- Change management skills

MARKETING, MARKETING, MARKETING

Having looked at the four themes we recognise that the marketing of services underpins everything we have said so far. As a team we have put a great deal of effort into marketing and promoting our services, within LIS and LJMU and beyond. As well as the textbook library marketing tools we mustn't lose sight of the importance of a 'can do attitude', going the extra mile and we pride ourselves in being the friendly face of LJMU to promote our services as high quality and good value for money to our off-campus users.

What does this mean for the wider liaison team in LIS?

We need to market our services and skills in terms of benefits and we need to offer all our stakeholders (academic staff, students and budget holders) a clear road map to services and resources.

We need to put more emphasis on marketing and promotion to ensure our survival. If we don't sell ourselves, our expertise and our services our stakeholders will not value what we have to offer. In order to thrive in the digital age, information support staff at all levels in academic libraries need to consider becoming broader-based generalists (eg. by developing marketing skills) while still retaining individual areas of expertise (say, in particular subject areas).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion we think it's important to make sure our services are future-proofed by embracing the technology available to us and using it to our advantage. We need to be able to operate on both sides of the digital divide and keep this uppermost in our minds when devising our user education programmes. The digital age does not negate the need for face to face contact but in fact makes it all the more important. By marketing what we do internally and externally we can prove our worth to our user group. In order to do all this we need extensive and continuing CPD for all our staff within Learning and Information Services. As part of the off-campus team we have had to develop and enhance our skills and we are keen to share our experiences. We are hoping to go to LILAC 09 (Librarians' Information Literacy Annual Conference) to talk through some of these issues with other interested colleagues and hope you can join us there.